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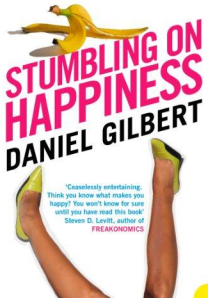

YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

Stumbling on Happiness

by Daniel Gilbert

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42 Highlights

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> We treat our future selves as though they were our children, spending most of the hours of most of our days constructing tomorrows that we hope will make them happy. Rather than indulging in whatever strikes our momentary fancy, we take responsibility for the welfare of our future selves, squirrelling away portions of our paycheques each month so they can enjoy their retirements on a putting green, jogging and flossing with some regularity so they can avoid coronaries and gum grafts, enduring dirty nappies and mind-numbing repetitions of The Cat in the Hat so that someday they will have fat-cheeked grandchildren to bounce on their laps.

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> The greatest achievement of the human brain is its ability to imagine objects and episodes that do not exist in the realm of the real, and it is this ability that allows us to think about the future.

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> As one philosopher noted, the human brain is an ‘anticipation machine’, and ‘making future’ is the most important thing it does.

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> Our brains were made for nexting, and that’s just what they’ll do. When we take a stroll on the beach, our brains predict how stable the sand will be when our foot hits it, and then adjust the tension in our knee accordingly. When we leap to catch a Frisbee, our brains predict where the disc will be when we cross its flight path, and then bring our hands to precisely that point. When we see a sand crab scurry behind a bit of driftwood on its way to the water, our brains predict when and where the critter will reappear, and then direct our eyes to the precise point of its reemergence. These predictions are remarkable in both the speed and accuracy with which they are made, and it is difficult to imagine what our lives would be like if our brains quit making them, leaving us completely ‘in

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> Adults love to ask children idiotic questions so that we can chuckle when they give us idiotic answers. One particularly idiotic question we like to ask children is this: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ Small

children look appropriately puzzled, worried perhaps that our question implies they are at some risk of growing down. If they answer at all, they generally come up with things like ‘the candy guy’ or ‘a tree climber’. We chuckle because the odds that the child will ever become the candy guy or a tree climber are vanishingly small, and they are vanishingly small because these are not the sorts of things that most children will want to be once they are old enough to ask idiotic questions themselves.

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Forestalling pleasure is an inventive technique for getting double the juice from half the fruit. Indeed, some events are more pleasurable to imagine than to experience (most of us can recall an instance in which we made love with a desirable partner or ate a wickedly rich dessert, only to find that the act was better contemplated than consummated), and in these cases people may decide to delay the event forever. For instance, volunteers in one study were asked to imagine themselves requesting a date with a person on whom they had a major crush, and those who had had the most elaborate and delicious fantasies about approaching their heartthrob were least likely to do so over the next few months.

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The fact is that human beings come into the world with a passion for control, they go out of the world the same way, and research suggests that if they lose their ability to control things at any point between their entrance and their exit, they become unhappy, helpless, hopeless and depressed.40 And occasionally dead. In

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Apparently, gaining control can have a positive impact on one’s health and well-being, but losing control can be worse than never having had any at all.

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We insist on steering our boats because we think we have a pretty good idea of where we should go, but the truth is that much of our steering is in vain–not because the boat won’t respond, and not because we can’t find our destination, but because the future is fundamentally different than it appears through the prospectiscope.

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By the time you finish these chapters, I hope you will understand why most of us spend so much of our lives turning rudders and hoisting sails, only to find that Shangri-la isn’t what and where we thought it would be.

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But, O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man’s eyes! Shakespeare, As You Like It

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> Happiness refers to feelings, virtue refers to actions, and those actions can cause those feelings. But not necessarily and not exclusively.

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> Fig. 6. The language-squishing hypothesis suggests that when given a birthday cake, Lori and Reba feel exactly as you feel but talk about it differently.

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> Studies such as these demonstrate that once we have an experience, we cannot simply set it aside and see the world as we would have seen it had the experience never happened. To the judge's dismay, the jury cannot disregard the prosecutor's snide remarks. Our experiences instantly become part of the lens through which we view our entire past, present and future, and like any lens, they shape and distort what we see.

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> occasionally smoke a cigar because it makes me happy, and my wife occasionally fails to understand why I must have a cigar to be happy when she can apparently be just as happy without one (and even happier without me having one). But the experience-stretching hypothesis suggests that I too could have been happy without cigars if only I had not experienced their pharmacological mysteries in my wayward youth. But I did, and because I did I now know what I am missing when I don't, hence that glorious moment during my spring holiday when I am reclining in a lawn chair on the golden sands of Kauai, sipping Talisker and watching the sun slip slowly into a taffeta sea, is just not quite perfect if I don't also have something stinky and Cuban in my mouth. I

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> As much as the scientist might wish for it, there isn't a view from nowhere.

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> it turns out, running with great haste from rabid wolverines is much more important than knowing what they are. Indeed, actions such as running away are so vitally important to the survival of terrestrial mammals like the ones from whom we are descended that evolution took no chances and designed the brain to answer the 'What should I do?' question before the 'What is it?' question.1 Experiments have demonstrated that the moment we encounter an object, our brains instantly analyse just a few of its key features and then use the presence or absence of these features to make one very fast and very simple decision: 'Is this object an important thing to which I ought to respond right now?'

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> Apparently, feelings that one interprets as fear in the presence of a sheer drop may be interpreted as lust in the presence of a sheer blouse–which is simply to say that people can be wrong about what they are feeling.

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> The word experience comes from the Latin experientia, meaning ‘to try’, whereas the word aware comes from the Greek horan, meaning ‘to see’. Experience implies participation in an event, whereas awareness implies observation of an event. The

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> This dissociation between awareness and experience can cause the same sort of spookiness with regard to our emotions. Some people seem to be keenly aware of their moods and feelings, and may even have a novelist’s gift for describing their every shade and flavour. Others of us come equipped with a somewhat more basic emotional vocabulary that, much to the chagrin of our romantic partners, consists primarily of good, not so good and I already told you.

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> If our expressive deficit is so profound and protracted that it even occurs outside of football season, we may be diagnosed with alexithymia, which literally means ‘absence of words to describe emotional states’. When alexithymics are asked what they are feeling, they usually say, ‘Nothing’, and when they are asked how they are feeling, they usually say, ‘I don’t know.’

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> The nature of subjective experience suggests there will never be a happyometer–a perfectly reliable instrument that allows an observer to measure with complete accuracy the characteristics of another person’s subjective experience so that the measurement can be taken, recorded and compared with another.

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> As Plato asked, ‘Are these things good for any other reason except that they end in pleasure, and get rid of and avert pain? Are you looking to any other standard but pleasure and pain when you call them good?’19

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> We cannot feel good about an imaginary future when we are busy feeling bad about an actual present. But rather than recognizing that this is the inevitable result of the Reality First policy, we mistakenly assume that the future event is the cause of the unhappiness we feel when we think about it. Our confusion seems terribly obvious to those who are standing on the sidelines, saying things like ‘You’re feeling low right now because Pa got drunk and fell off the porch, Ma went to jail for whupping Pa, and your pickup truck got repossessed–but everything will seem different next week and you’ll really wish you’d decided to go with us to the opera.’ At some level we recognize that our friends are probably right. Nonetheless, when we try to overlook, ignore or set aside our current gloomy state and make a forecast about how we will feel tomorrow, we find that it’s a lot like trying to imagine the taste of marshmallow while chewing liver.

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> Imagination cannot easily transcend the boundaries of the present, and one reason for this is that it must borrow machinery that is owned by perception. The fact that these two processes must run on the same platform means that we are sometimes confused about which one is running. We assume that what we feel as we imagine the future is what we'll feel when we get there, but in fact, what we feel as we imagine the future is often a response to what's happening in the present.

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> The time-share arrangement between perception and imagination is one of the causes of presentism, but it is not the only one. So if the train hasn't yet arrived at your stop, if you aren't quite ready to turn out the light and go to sleep, or if the people at Starbucks aren't giving you dirty looks as they get out the mops, let's explore another.

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> When they measured the volunteers' satisfaction over the course of the study, they found that volunteers in the no-variety group were more satisfied than were volunteers in the variety group. In other words, variety made people less happy, not more.

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> If you asked a child to count upward from zero and another child to count downward from a million, you could be pretty sure that when they finally got exhausted, gave up and went off in search of eggs to throw at your garage door, they would have reached very different numbers.

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> people generally don't like to buy the most expensive item in a category, hence retailers can improve their sales by stocking a few very expensive items that no one actually buys ('Oh my God, the 1982 Chateau Haut-Brion Pessac-Léognan sells for five hundred dollars a bottle!') but that make less expensive items seem like a bargain by comparison ("I'll just stick with the sixty-dollar zinfandel").

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> Most of us have had similar experiences. We compare the small, elegant speakers with the huge, boxy speakers, notice the acoustical difference, and buy the hulking leviathans. Alas, the acoustical difference is a difference we never notice again, because when we get the monster speakers home we do not compare their sound to the sound of some speaker we listened to a week earlier at the store, but we do compare their awful boxiness to the rest of our sleek, elegant and now-spoiled decor.

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> you want to be happy, healthy, wealthy and wise, then skip the vitamin pills and the plastic surgeries and try public humiliation, unjust incarceration or quadriplegia instead. Uh-huh. Right.

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> Most stimuli are ambiguous–that is, they can mean more than one thing–and the interesting question is how we disambiguate them–that is, how we know which of a stimulus's many meanings to infer on a particular occasion. Research shows that context, frequency and recency are especially important in this regard.

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> The bottom line is this: the brain and the eye may have a contractual relationship in which the brain has agreed to believe what the eye sees, but in return the eye has agreed to look for what the brain wants.

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> Because we tend to remember the best of times and the worst of times instead of the most likely of times, the wealth of experience that young people admire does not always pay clear dividends.

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> The fact that we often judge the pleasure of an experience by its ending can cause us to make some curious choices. For example, when the researchers who performed the cold-water study asked the volunteers which of the two trials they would prefer to repeat, 69 per cent of the volunteers chose to repeat the long one–that is, the one that entailed an extra thirty seconds of pain.

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> When people are asked to name the single object they would try to save if their home caught fire, the most common answer (much to the chagrin of the family dog) is 'My photo album'. We don't just treasure our memories; we are our memories.

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> Economists explain that wealth has 'declining marginal utility', which is a fancy way of saying that it hurts to be hungry, cold, sick, tired and scared, but once you've bought your way out of these burdens, the rest of your money is an increasingly useless pile of paper.10

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> the production of wealth does not necessarily make individuals happy, but it does serve the needs of an economy, which serves the needs of a stable society, which serves as a network for the propagation of delusional beliefs about happiness and wealth.

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> Economies thrive when individuals strive, but because individuals will only strive for their own happiness, it is essential that they mistakenly believe that producing and consuming are routes to personal well-being.

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First let me prove to you that the experience of a single randomly selected individual can sometimes provide a better basis for predicting your future experience than your own imagination can. And then let me show you why you–and I–find this so difficult to believe.

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Because if you are like most people, then like most people, you don't know you're like most people. Science has given us a lot of facts about the average person, and one of the most reliable of these facts is that the average person doesn't see herself as average. Most students see themselves as more intelligent than the average student,26 most business managers see themselves as more competent than the average business manager,27 and most football players see themselves as having better 'football sense' than their teammates.28 Ninety per cent of motorists consider themselves to be safer-than-average drivers,29 and 94 per cent of college professors consider themselves to be better-than-average teachers.30 Ironically, the bias toward seeing ourselves as better than average causes us to see ourselves as less biased than average too.

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In 1738, a Dutch polymath named Daniel Bernoulli claimed he had the answer. He suggested that the wisdom of any decision could be calculated by multiplying the probability that the decision will give us what we want by the utility of getting what we want. By utility, Bernoulli meant something like goodness or pleasure.